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Judith Friedman Hansen

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## The Proxemics of Danish Daily Life

## THE PROXEMICS OF DANISH DAILY LIFE

JUDITH FRIEDMAN HANSEN

Proxemics, the study of the structuring and interpretation of space in human social life, has caught the interest of researchers in a variety of disciplines. In a recent survey of the field, Watson (1974) notes the diversity of contributions thus far, but laments the paucity of studies of specifically cultural systems of proxemic behavior. Edward Hall, the foremost architect of proxemics as a researchable domain, has called consistently for such studies. Analysis of the complex dynamics of spacing in daily life within particular cultural milieus is an essential cornerstone for crosscultural comparison of communication process.<sup>1</sup>

Several theoretical frameworks provide partial perspectives on this problem. Cognitive anthropologists such as James Spradley, for example, have studied space as a semantic domain and as a behavioral setting. In his analysis of tramp taxonomies, Spradley (1970) showed that sub-cultural definitions of physical and social spaces are directly associated with behavioral strategies, and that intercultural discontinuities in these definitions in combination with differential status and power among interacting groups have critical consequences for the strategies adopted by both. John Bennett (1969) in his study of an agrarian region in Saskatchewan used an expanded cultural ecological model to explore the definition and use of environmental features by the region's inhabitants, suggesting further analytic links between these microprocesses and macrostructural development within an ecological niche. In some respects, both these approaches resemble a third, that of symbolic interactionism. Eclectically melding insights from transactional psychology and Schutzian phenomenology with a focal orientation to the socially constructed character of cultural reality, symbolic interactionists like Herbert Blumer (1961) have formulated a relatively broad framework for the analysis of microprocess. Rather than taking cultural definitions and interpretations of experience for granted as parameters of analysis, many symbolic interactionists ask instead how these shared understandings are generated, sustained, and modified in the course of daily life. In the view of these investigators, it is not enough to establish that a pattern of behavior obtains; the crucial question is, rather, what complex processes result in an interplay of observable behaviors such that participants

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*Judith Friedman Hansen is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Indiana University. Her research interests focus on symbolic interaction and social organization in urban settings. Recent papers include "Proxemics and the Interpretive Process in Human Communication" and "Scientists, Friend and Voyeur: The Anthropologist in the Field."*

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and/or observers infer "patterning" in a given context. From this perspective, analysis of contextual features as perceived by participants is requisite to an adequate understanding of the phenomenon under study.

In light of the manifest concern with symbolic aspects of interaction, it is not surprising that much research reflecting this theoretical stance has concentrated on linguistic and paralinguistic transactions. Methodologically, verbal communicative behavior is far more easily recorded in the detail necessary for intensive analysis than is the dense stream of nonverbal behavior. Equally important, however, has been the implicit assumption that language is *the* symbolic mode of communication par excellence in human society. By extension, other communicative modes are often ignored as a-symbolic or of peripheral symbolic significance or are treated as subordinate structural analogues of language.

Use of a less restrictive model of communication, on the other hand, allows us to redress our traditional neglect of the dynamics of situated multichannel communication. Worth and Gross (1974), for example, have outlined the bases of



Figure 1 —caption for cartoon is as follows: "We appreciate God's Gifts. Danish love of food it's called—but it's simply that we make sure in a discreet way that nothing is wasted in a world where food is scarce in so many places." Note restaurant service on platters rather than individual plates, quantities of food, accompanied by beer and snaps (akavit) and manifest enjoyment of the feast. Absence of chairs at front of table is of course a function of the requirements of drawing, not a "realistic" reflection of table arrangements. (From *How to be a Dane* by Bo Bøjesen, 1960.)



such a model in their discussion of "symbolic strategies." Concerned with the fact that human experience is always mediated by interpretation, they posit a developmental-analytic hierarchy of types of recognition (and articulation) of meaning in perceived events along with types of interpretive strategies used to order and respond to them. "Communication" they define as "a social process, within a context, in which signs are produced and transmitted, perceived, and treated as messages from which meaning can be inferred" (Worth and Gross 1974:30). "Meaning" may be purely signatory—as when we simply *recognize* an event, thereby attributing to it a place in the scheme of things. Or it may be symbolic, i.e., recognized as of possible communicational significance. In the latter case, we add to recognition an assumption of *intentionality* in the event's production/transmission, an assumption that the event has been constructed by an intending other (1974:27). The dynamic of the model resides in the dialectic relationship posited between acts of articulation and acts of interpretation: "We articulate in terms of the subsequent interpretations we expect, just as we imply only in those terms which we can expect others to use when they infer." Meaning thus inheres not in signs but "in the social context, whose conventions and rules dictate the articulatory and interpretive strategies to be invoked by producers and interpreters of symbolic forms" (1974:30).

That an analytic framework of the sort suggested by Worth and Gross, Blumer, and others is essential to the study of proxemic processes in context, I have argued elsewhere (Friedman Hansen n.d.). In the present essay, my intention is to present a case example of its application within a particular cultural milieu. My initial premise is that fruitful development of the concept "proxemic behavior" must go beyond programmatic definitions, unsituated crosscultural surveys of proxemic interactional styles, and analyses of small group interaction which leave unexamined the cultural matrix in which they are embedded. Specifically this requires holistic integration of data on cultural definitions of space, settings, and social relations; attitudes and values with regard to them; and behavioral strategies used in light of them. By treating the multiple facets of proxemic process, along with the context in which this is embedded, as constituents of a single gestalt, we can more readily apprehend their integral relationship in the life world experienced by participants. In particular, we acquire the means to explicate the processes which generate in an ongoing dynamic the types of "acts," "actors," and "settings" which comprise the etic units of our analysis.

From this perspective, the study of human communication as Worth and Gross define it becomes synonymous with the study of human symbolic interaction. Only by taking into account the intricate interplay of communicative channels and modes in the orchestration of messages; the meanings verbalized and nonverbal, implied and inferred; and the strategies of interpretation and response used by participants, can we approach an understanding of social life. In Denmark, as in other societies sharing in the Northern European cultural heritage (cf. Watson 1970), the primary communicative channels are visual and aural with secondary emphasis on the tactile and relatively minor dependence on

other channels. Yet to understand visual aspects of communication we must examine them within the embedding context of simultaneous message transmission via other routes. In analytic terms, we may say that particular channels predominate in particular situations, settings, or microcontexts. But we must remember that the experience of participants is usually not differentiated in this way. Behavioral strategies, therefore, are rooted in the holistically apprehended context and require for their elucidation equally holistic analytic techniques. Within the constraints of a single written text I shall, of course, be able only to present a profile of the less complex features of this whole; a more complete treatment is in preparation.

## THE ECOLOGY OF DANISH SPACE<sup>2</sup>

Danes frequently remark that Denmark is a little country among the world's nations. The connotations of this comment include more than physical dimensions. Their relative powerlessness in international politics and economic dependence on world markets, for example, is often implicit, as is the awareness that their language and culture are shared by an infinitesimal proportion of the world's people. Yet as often as this smallness is noted as a fact of life to be dealt with, equally frequently is it voiced with evident affection. What lies behind the words is a complex of cultural values which reflect a preference for surroundings that do not dwarf human actors, for spaces that are easily comprehended by the perceiver.

In spite of its agricultural base (nearly three-quarters of the total land area is under some form of agricultural exploitation), Denmark is becoming increasingly industrialized and markedly urbanized as well. Farming itself has been industrialized to a considerable degree, and rural young people seek better opportunities in towns and cities. Both population growth and demographic redistribution have expanded small towns into significant population nodes, and welded outlying towns into metropolitan suburbs. Further, an extensive communication network of roads, railways, ferries and mass media link all parts of the country, facilitating the obliteration of rural-urban contrasts (cf. Anderson 1967; Bidstrup and Kaufmann 1963). At the same time, few Danes have fully severed their emotional and social ties with their rural roots. Not only have many Danes recent historical connections and living kin in rural environments, but they retain an abiding love of "nature" as well. Vacation homes in more or less rural settings are owned or rented by a rather large proportion of the population and used where possible for weekend retreats as well as longer vacation periods. Those without access to cabins of their own often visit friends or relatives who are more fortunate in this regard. Some rent garden plots, available in or near urban areas, from the government. Another not uncommon vacation option is to enroll in a short course offered for this purpose by a rural folk high school (similar in some ways to a community college), thus combining intellectual stimulation and sociability with bucolic surroundings.

In daily life, however, the physical spaces in which Danes spend most time are workplaces and homes. It is the latter setting which will serve as our focus here, since it is the scene



of interactions which Danes tend to value particularly highly. Virtually 80% of the city's population live in multiple family dwellings. Moreover, of the 520,000 households in the greater metropolitan area, nearly 70% occupy three or fewer rooms, and nearly 40% have only one or two rooms (Danmark Statistik 1969). The way in which this available living space is dealt with likewise reflects a distinctive orientation, one which extends beyond the elements mentioned earlier, to a complex of assumptions and values concerning the relationship between space, objects, and people.

## OBJECTS, SPACES, AND PEOPLE CULTURAL ORIENTATIONS

In order to understand Danish attitudes toward physical space and proxemics, it is necessary to analyze certain key concepts in some depth. Prime among these is the notion of *hygge*. *Hygge* denotes a particular valued state of existence, one which most Danes consider to be typically (even quintessentially) Danish. In its adjectival form, *hyggelig*, it is also one of the most commonly invoked descriptive terms. Elsewhere (Friedman Hansen 1974), I have discussed its ramifications for the cultural whole of which it is a part. For present purposes, I will concentrate on those aspects which bear directly on the relationship among objects, spaces, and people.

In a general sense, *hygge* denotes comfort, coziness, cheerfulness, and friendliness. To be in a situation characterized by *hygge* is to be in a state of pleasant well-being and security, with a relaxed frame of mind and open enjoyment of the immediate situation in all its small pleasures. It is a state one achieves most often with close members of one's social network—with one's family, extended family, and friends. Although it is by no means tied exclusively to a specific setting, it is strongly associated with one: home. The epitome of *hygge* is *hjemlig hygge*, homey *hygge*. Danes often characterize themselves as home-loving in comparison with other Europeans, and it is interesting in this regard that the atmosphere in a public restaurant or inn will frequently be described in terms of its degree of homeyness. In fact, however, the concept can be applied to a wide variety of "objects": a room or a house, a party, a book, a person, an activity—each of these (and more) could be described as *hyggelig*.

Yet, while the term is extensively used, few Danes when asked are able to specify the constituent elements of the concept. Though consensus is far from complete on *all* its connotations, in general "everybody knows" what is meant in the ordinary range of daily usage. Drawing from a diversity of mass media sources, interviews, and my own observations, the following sketch will indicate the major components of *hygge* as it pertains to the problem at hand. (For fuller discussion, see Friedman Hansen 1974.)

As we have already noted, *hygge* involves comfort, coziness, a sense of well-being, and a relaxed frame of mind. The elements of comfort depend, of course, on the context of *hygge*, but generally speaking warmth (both figurative and real), satisfaction of oral appetites, and a settled physical position are prime contributors. In its aspect of comfort,

*hygge* excludes by definition a distracted or preoccupied state of mind; it is commitment par excellence to the present moment. As one commentator observed, "*Hygge* rushes in of itself as soon as one is carefree" (Hartmann-Petersen 1965:35).

The conditions under which this relaxed sense of well-being can thrive are clearly the keys to the riddle of *hygge*. Some conditions are subject to varied individual interpretation; for example, *hygge* is most commonly associated with a plurality of people, with family and friends—yet some assert vigorously that *hygge* is equally to be found alone, whether gazing out over the countryside, burrowed in a warm bed, or sitting quietly in the twilight. Other conditions garner somewhat more consensus: *opnåelighed* (attainableness) and familiarity, closure and security.

Extremes of any kind tend to be antithetical to *hygge*; moderation is the keynote. Perfection is not *hyggelig*, newness is not *hyggelig*.

Just as there is nothing as un-*hyggelig* and impersonal as people who always appear in new clothes, so is nothing so un-*hyggelig* as visiting a home with completely new things . . . . The unused is distant, a bit unfriendly. *Hygge* first emerges after mutual adjustment between people and things [Karlsen 1965:83-84].

Neither meticulousness nor messiness in a room are *hyggelig*, but the organized disorder of a home which is being lived in can be. The "mutual adjustment between people and things" of which Karlsen speaks involves a balance between the two. Things must not force a family into a definite living set that goes contrary to their habits, nor should they force people into submission to a particular aesthetic.

Familiarity on the other hand is very much an element of *hygge*. An individual's vision of *hygge* is likely to be based on the model which his childhood memories provide, and the specific associations which attach to *hygge* are for him likely to derive from these early experiences. *Hygge*, as Karlsen (1965:83-84) puts it, is essentially conservative. It thrives among the unchanging stability of old furniture and old habits.

"Familiarity," however, connotes far more than simply "the habitual state of affairs." To grasp its full significance in the present context, we must consider certain features of Danish "temporal space," i.e., attitudes toward experiential time. Danes appear to be more actively aware of the historicity of phenomena than Americans. Even among the young, one finds widespread interest in Danish history coupled with considerable affection for antiques and heirlooms. Genealogical tracing, which is common, focuses not on a potential relationship with famous or powerful persons but on the concrete details of family history. Informants took pleasure in showing me the house in which they or a parent or grandparent had grown up or in recounting the history of an antique cabinet or heirloom utensil they possessed. Objects, places, events, and relationships are typically associated with known traditions or historical contexts in which they are embedded. Invocations of these associations add depth to their enjoyment in the present.

This orientation to the past is complemented by a readiness to commit oneself to spontaneous involvement in the present moment. To resolve this apparent paradox we must inspect another concept, that of *minde*, memory or



Figure 2 —a working class family, 1905. Notice the low ceiling and narrow room dimensions, the profuse use of pictures and photos on the walls, and the low hanging lamp over the table. This room is both living area and dining room. The table area has been extended to serve as a dinner table. Evergreen boughs around pictures are there to serve as Christmas decorations. Note Christmas tree "crowded" behind mother at left.



recollection. One of three terms<sup>3</sup> commonly used to denote an act of recollection, *at mindes* (the infinitive form) connotes not merely bringing back into one's thoughts, but recalling a fact or event embedded in a memory of its contexts, its atmosphere and associations. A *minde* (pl. *minder*) is a keepsake, a souvenir, a memento; it is a reminder of past experience in its experiential quality. A *minde* is a treasure, brought out periodically to be fondled and enjoyed anew. Encapsulation of present experience intensifies the present moment with an awareness that it will be tomorrow's memory. Thus scrapbooks and photographic records of "memorable" occasions are virtually universal in Danish households and frequently consulted, tangible expressions of the interplay between past and present. Moreover, slides and home movies are often shown in contexts associated with *hygge*. Serving as a symbol of experiences shared with other participants or as a "conversation-piece" for sharing in the present moment, these visual records are used to enhance the sense of embeddedness with which viewers invest their relationships to one another.

It is in this sense as well, then, that familiarity contributes to *hygge*. Reminiscence can accord a belated aura of *hygge* to experiences which were of more mixed quality at the time. *Minder* can also be vehicles of present *hygge*, framing the moment with the warm and secure comfort of happy memories. Skou (1965:22-24) writes of her canopied bed as being an exceptionally *hyggelig* refuge after a long day's work:

I lie and look around the room which holds so many *minder* of people who have been close to me. Pictures and photographs and books speak their silent language and strange objects tell of travels and manifold experiences.... The hearth's reflection on the ceiling and walls illuminates all the things in the room and calls up *minder*.... It is *hyggelig* to lie in the twilight and immerse oneself in the *minder* of many rich and happy years.

The stable predictableness of a *hyggelig* situation, the element of moderation, excludes *hygge* from "grand occasions" or events marked by uncertainty such as birth. Celebrations of holidays and ritual occasions such as birthdays and confirmation, on the other hand, can be and ideally are *hyggelig* as well as festive. Christmas represents the greatest concentration of concern with *hygge* in the Danish calendar. December is the darkest month of the year in Scandinavia: in Denmark this means that there are only seven hours of gray light between sunrise and sundown.<sup>4</sup> Christmas thus constitutes a festival of light and an antidote to the depressing gloom of the season.

Indeed, light and darkness play a definite role in the perception of *hygge*. Neither total darkness or stark light is *hyggelig*: moderation again defines the desirable range. Contrasting the traditional brick house with windows cut into the thick wall with modern glass-faced dwellings, Danish architect Arne Karlsen (1965:79) points out the effect of the two structures on lighting.

The great jump between the light intensity outside and inside was softened [in the brick house] by reflection from white-painted woodwork and light edges. In the room behind the glass facade [on the other hand] the overarching sky dominates the whole room. The room gets its color from it. Golden and friendly in the mild morning and evening light of a sunny day, over-poweringly white with hard shadows when the sun is at its height, and cold and sharp on a winter day with gray diffuse light. Piercing on a gray day with snow. *Uhyggelig*.<sup>5</sup>

Subdued lighting and candles ("living lights") are typical accompaniments of *hygge*. Fluorescent lighting was seen by informants in contrast as cold, non-*hyggelig*. Skou described above the pleasure of lying in the half-dark or twilight as the fire cast its light on *minde*-decked walls. This time of day, known as *mørkning* or *tusmørke* (twilight) is commonly felt to be a special and particularly *hyggelig* part of the day. "To



hold *mørkning*” or to watch it darken, is an activity somewhat akin to our watching the sun go down. The Danish emphasis is not, however, on the dramatic brilliance of the sun setting on the horizon, but on the subtler shifting of light and darkness.

Another lighting effect traditionally associated with *hygge* is the circle of light cast by a hanging lamp. Surrounded by darkness, the light embraces the activity, event, or assembled group, thereby enclosing the focal area against the darker periphery. The note of closure here is an important constituent of Danish attitudes toward space, a pivotal nexus between visual and other communicative channels.

With respect to physical environment, most Danes would probably agree that open countryside is not *hyggelig*, whereas a bounded clearing can be. Karlsen observes:

We know from old towns that it can be *hyggelig* to wander up narrow streets and across small squares overlooked by close-knit rows of house fronts, shifting from sun to shadow. It can be *hyggelig* to walk in quiet streets and among many people in busy shopping districts. But wherever one wanders, one must feel secure, if *hygge* is to accompany one . . . .

It is difficult for most of us to sense *hygge* of any kind among colossal things. The dispersed town with sprawling highrise mastodons can have a dramatic silhouette and be rich in sculptural effect, but residents who walk through the streets of the abyss can find *hygge* only inside their own front door. Only spaces—inside or out—which are in reasonable proportion to an individual's own dimensions can effect the emergence of *hygge* . . . . The *uhyggelig*<sup>5</sup>

room—and mystery writers' favorite setting—is traditionally the English hall with high ceilings, open roof construction, the stairs, galleries, and innumerable openings to endless dark hallways [Karlsen 1965:76-77].

In fact, the smaller the scale the better. Many of the old farm houses and some town dwellings are quite small relative to contemporary body-builds and construction practices, with low ceilings (from about five-and-a-half to six-and-a-half feet high), small rooms, and small windows. A few houses remain, still occupied, which are virtually miniature in size, and are considered especially *hyggelig* by both their inhabitants and Danish tourists.

Closure as an aspect of *hygge*, therefore, involves size and boundaries. Both elements are perceived as contributing to one's sense of security. A space with clear-cut boundaries, framed by regular walls and easy to glimpse to its furthest corner feels safe, suggest Karlsen (1965:78), because one can perceive its secrets in one glance. Moreover, he continues, in fortunate instances the calmness of form can encourage calmness of mood. In the “open plan” of construction, where spaces flow into one another without clear transitions, providing an infinite series of perceptions to one who moves through them, this security is often lost. As a result folding screens have been reintroduced to create enclosed spaces in the “dwelling aquarium,” and fireplaces have become necessary as focuses of *hygge*. The family clusters around the fireplace, backs turned to the open spaces, when it wants to

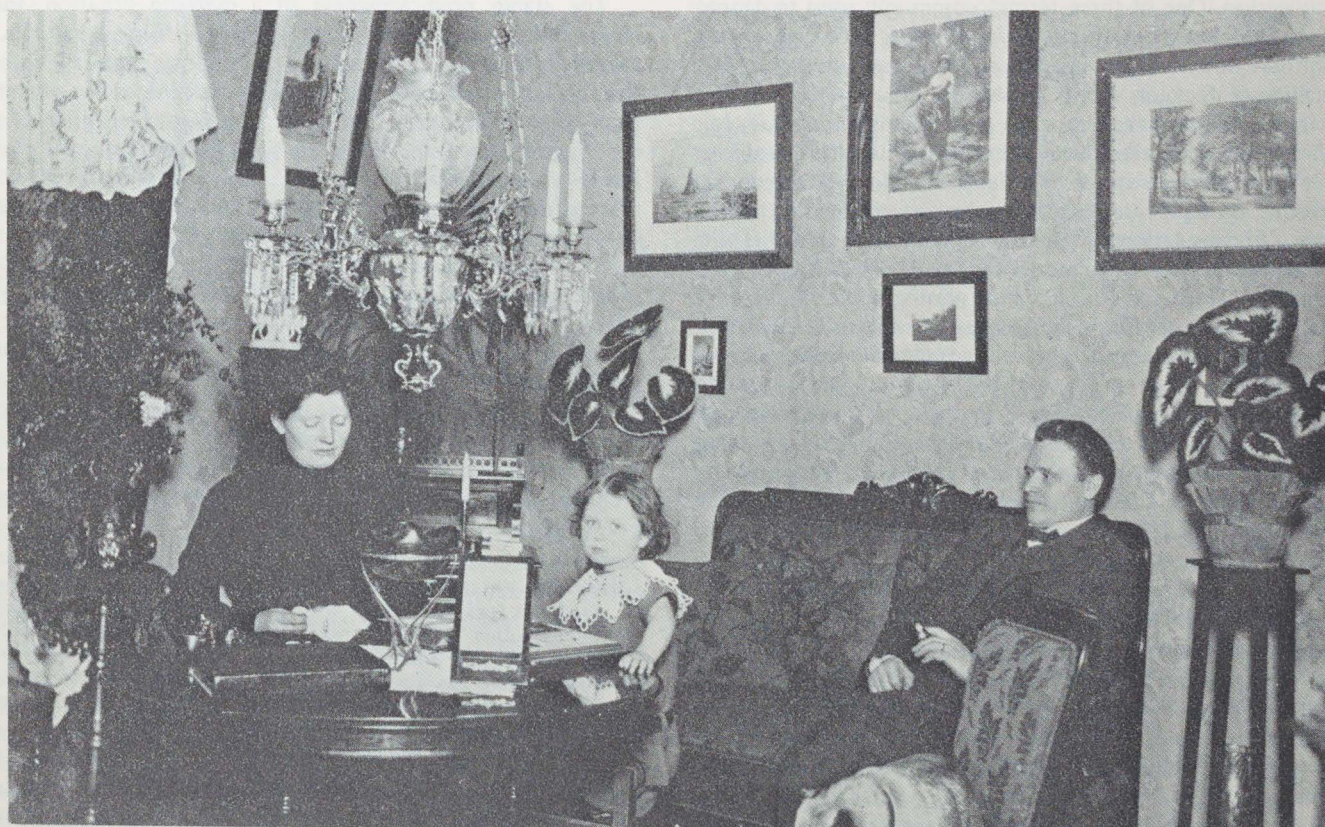


Figure 3 —a cigar-sorter and family, 1906. In this prosperous home, the living area clusters around a relatively small table. The main dining area is elsewhere. Note again the many pictures and photos on the walls and the focal activity at the table: looking through photograph albums. Again note the low hanging light—and the use of the corner of the room to help effect closure.



have *hygge*. Thus, notes Karlsen (1965:78):

He who seeks a *hyggelig* sitting place in aloneness must find himself a nook from which the field of vision is limited, and where the walls stand close behind his back.

One Danish woman, married to a sailor who was away from home for months at a time, lessened her feelings of loneliness by making herself a *hygge*krog (*hygge*-nook). Fashioning curtains out of open-weave material, she hung them around one corner of the apartment when her husband left for ship duty, and used the nook for evening reading and knitting in his absence. On his return, she took the curtains down and enjoyed the whole apartment with him. In another case, an elderly couple had built a "*hygge*-corner" in their living room, a raised platform about thirty square feet in expanse set before a small window. Here stood a small round table and two chairs, enclosed by a low wooden balustrade.

The notion of protective boundaries also reflects the value for undisturbed involvement in the present moment of *hygge*. One would not ordinarily speak of *hygge* with strangers or even acquaintances. It is a state most often linked with one's circle of close friends and family. The feeling of protectedness within *hygge*'s embrace tends to carry with it a sense of being provided for, of having one's basic creature comforts satisfied. Both these features thus contribute to relaxation and commitment to the event itself, as well as to the sense of social, physical, temporal, and experiential boundedness associated with it.

The implications of this concept for Danish social life can be highlighted by a brief consideration of strategies typically associated with it. How does one create *hygge* or insure its presence? To some extent, furnishings traditionally associated with *hygge* can help to encourage it. Flowers, candles, tablecloths, food, and drink—these are among such conventionally helpful items, and are commonly used in this way. And yet in and of themselves such objects have no particular power. Rather their presence represents the intent and effort of the host or the responsible individual to create a *menneskevenlig* (person-friendly or person-welcoming) milieu. Such a situation is related by Skou (1965:26) as she reminisces about her younger days on tour with her actor husband.

One of the young actresses . . . understood how to create *hygge* wherever she was . . . with just a few possessions . . . A pretty silk spread decked the table on which stood a bouquet of flowers and a bowl of fruit. On the night-table, the white cold marble top of which had also been covered with a piece of silk cloth, stood a photograph. These small things had transformed the room from a grim and impersonal space to a *hyggelig* place to spend time.<sup>6</sup>

One indication of the importance of the techniques for creating *hygge* is the amount of space which family- and women's-magazines devote to their explication. At the same time it is generally agreed that *hygge* can not be directly "constructed" without precluding its emergence. As the author/poet Tove Ditlevsen (1965:17) notes, *hygge* "is a fickle guest which comes when it suits it and most often when no one has called for it." Indeed, she continues, "if someone names its name," to exclaim "*Ih, hvor har vi det hyggeligt!*" (Oh, what a *hyggelig* time we're having!), this signals its absence, for it implies a degree of evaluative detachment which is antithetical to the involvement which generates *hygge*.

As I have said, a setting conducive to the emergence of *hygge* typically provides for the comfort of participants. Comfort and its corollary of relaxation are most easily achieved in a familiar context, especially one's own home. In the less familiar environs of another person's home or a public place such as a restaurant, ease is encouraged by a sense of personalness in the surroundings. Thus it is more *hyggelig* to sit in a living room which is clearly being lived in than in a perfectly appointed living room such as might be found in a furniture exhibition. "The room which holds so many *minder*" to which Skou refers is quite common in Denmark. While the walls and table tops of older people are massed with photographs and other mementos of a lifetime, younger people tend to display somewhat fewer of the *minder* they keep. Typically, however, enough are evident that an entering visitor is immediately aware of the personal-historic atmosphere of the living space. A room without these accretions of living is uninviting, both because it is impersonal and because it suggests a lack of involvement on the part of the inhabitant with common human experiences. Furniture displays, particularly of living room suites, typically attempt to offset the impersonality of a display by placing a bottle of liquor on the coffee table; two or more glasses casually grace the table, and an open pack of cigarettes frequently completes the picture of studied *hygge*. Moreover, paintings, common in homes of all classes are more frequently originals, often done by a relative, than prints.

Restaurants are likewise subject to these values. A *hyggelig* restaurant is one which suggests by its interior that it belongs to someone, that someone takes pride in or has affection for its furnishings. Thus antique copper cooking utensils or porcelain pieces or apparent souvenirs commonly line the walls of restaurants and help to dispel the sense of eating in a public dining room. Likewise the most common types of restaurant china are heavy duty versions of two of the most popular Danish porcelain patterns.

Familiarity in settings other than one's own home is increased by virtue of fairly standard choices both in hospitality and in utilization of living space. Ideally, Danish living space includes an entryway, a living room, a dining room, bedrooms, and a balcony. In fact, the housing situation is too tight to provide many Danes with this ideal. Many rooms, therefore, must serve multiple functions; for example, a living room may be a bedroom at night, or a bedroom both dining room and study by day. The essential point is that this living space is rather compressed, and exploitation of this space for all family activities requires maximum flexibility of furnishings. It is noteworthy under the circumstances that the minimum furnishings are as standard as they are. A couch flanking one wall, facing a narrow low table approximately its own length over which a low-hanging chandelier casts a circle of light is typical. One or two other comfortable chairs are set in corners of the room or in convenient spaces along the walls. In addition, one may expect to find a television or radio, a small bookcase, and similar vehicles of leisure activity. The living room and the entryway are typically minimum units of Danish living space; at the same time, they are the primary "public areas" involved in informal sociable interactions. Despite the emphasis on shared food in Danish hospitality, kitchens typically constitute work areas but not living space.



Thus whereas Italians, for example, use the kitchen as a primary locus of informal interaction, the living room serves this purpose in Denmark.

Another feature of *hygge*, closely related to the elements of relaxed warmth, closure, and interpersonal commitment to the ongoing interaction can be detected in the nature of tables used as foci of sociable gatherings. While the relative narrowness of coffee and dining room tables in part reflects the exigencies of compressed living space, it also facilitates eye contact among participants; the vast majority of home-based sociable interactions involve use of one of them, most often the coffee table. Even when a meal has been served at the larger dining table, dessert and coffee are served at the smaller one. I discovered an amusing sort of confirmation of this analysis at a furniture exhibition: a table about 40 inches square with two half-moons cut out of opposite sides, such that the distance between two people seated in the niches was reduced to about a forearm's length (just close enough to link arms in a toast)—and labelled a "hygge-table."

### PROXEMICS OF DANISH INTERACTION

In the preceding section we surveyed some of the fundamental parameters which serve to orient Danish utilization of physical and interpersonal space. It remains to show more specifically how these affect behavioral strategies in everyday life.

Proxemic relations among strangers display a limited range of acceptable body contact according to context. Where two strangers maintained relatively close physical proximity over a period of time, as would be the case for instance on a crowded train or bus, direct body and eye contact is eschewed. In a crowded shop, on the other hand, people frequently bump into others unintentionally; such a brief intrusion on personal space is rarely acknowledged either verbally or kinesically, and appears to be of no moment. In open squares where people sit conversing or watching the passing array of humanity, visual intrusion on personal space is minimized as well by an apparent avoidance of concentrated attention on any particular stranger.

Between individuals who are engaged in direct face-to-face communication, however, three elements seem to comprise the minimal definition of mutual orientation. These are the greeting and parting ritual of shaking one's interactant(s)' right hand (accompanied by verbal formulae), maintaining direct eye contact during conversation, and when in a group of more than two persons, referring to any other individual present by name rather than by a third-person pronoun (i.e., "he," "she," "they"). The first "rule" is not without exceptions: in a shop or restaurant, for example, patrons usually do not shake hands with service personnel unless they have developed a personal relationship in the course of repeated interactions. In most cases, verbal greetings suffice. "Professional" service relationships, however, generally do entail handshaking; a visit to a doctor or insurance broker or what have you, where the individuals are engaged in a more "personalized" service transaction, is always initiated by this ritual contact.

For the present analysis, I would like to concentrate on the class of relationships which are of most significance to Danes themselves: those with kinsmen and friends. In these

cases the three base elements, although they remain salient, are integrated with more varied and elaborate modes of proxemic orientation. The most striking synthesis is visible in sociable gatherings, i.e., situations in which participants come together to share leisure hours. Such occasions typically also represent the epitome of *hygge*.

As a prototype of sociable interaction, let us consider a typical gathering at home of close members of a social network. When a guest arrives, the host greets him or her at the door, shaking hands and expressing pleasure at the guest's arrival. In the entryway the guest thanks the host for the invitation, leaves his coat on one of the hooks that line the wall, offers any gift he has brought, checks his appearance in the mirror, and proceeds into the living room. Here the newly arrived guest greets any prior arrivals, shakes hands with them, and (frequently upon invitation by the host) sits down.

Given the limited spaces with which the average Dane has to work, one might expect participants in a gathering to make maximal use of the living room area, to luxuriate, perhaps, in what space there is. In practice, the very opposite occurs; the gathering clusters around the coffee table in the circle of light cast by the chandelier. After guests have begun to arrive, the dispersed chairs are moved over to the table, enhancing the sense of special coming together implicit in the definition of the interaction. When all guests are seated in a cluster around the table, the host(s) offer food and drink. If guests have been invited for a meal, they will generally be offered a pre-meal drink here (such as sherry) and return to this area after eating for coffee and any further refreshment.

What happens if guests are numerous? Logically, a cluster might be expanded to accommodate more participants, several clusters might be formed, or a different spatial arrangement might be used. In practice, the cluster will expand up to the maximum number of chairs which can be squeezed closely around the one table, generally a maximum of eight or ten.

If the number of guests exceeds this potential, multiple clusters (usually including from four to seven members) are formed and mechanisms of social circulation are brought into play. Although multiple clusters tend not to be as stable in their personnel as a single cluster, they are generally considerably less transient than typical groups at large American parties. This relative stability is facilitated, again, by the furnishing: in their concern for all aspects of a guest's comfort, Danish hosts will provide a seat for every guest and if possible small tables as well. At the same time, each participant expects and is expected to circulate at least to the extent that he chats with every other participant before the evening is over.

Parties involving close relatives and friends are most often small enough to permit a single focused grouping, and this arrangement seems to be the most popular. An aberrant instance from my fieldwork will help to illustrate the way in which these background features of successful gatherings are interrelated.

On the occasion of his birthday, Hr. P. invited his immediate extended family for an evening celebration. In all there were 14 guests, including siblings of his wife and himself, their children and grandchildren, and assorted



Figure 4 —entryway is seen through door on right. Again, note the use of the corner to define the boundaries of the area, and the low hanging lights supplemented by candles. There are fewer pictures on the walls than in the 1900s, but they are still important. (The sixth person—missing from couch—is the photographer.)



spouses and myself. In order to retain the unity of the gathering despite its size, the host pair had set another low table end to end with the coffee table and covered them both with a single tablecloth, so that guests were as usual clustered around a common locus. Hr. P., who values *hygge* and festiveness as highly as any Dane I know, attempted to draw the group together by rising to make a welcoming speech and toast, but it quickly became apparent that the usual sense of unity and mutual commitment to the gathering as a whole was not emerging from the interaction which followed. After refreshments had been consumed, he tried a different strategy, inviting the men into another room to drink and chat for a while—a common practice among his own age group. The younger men, however, preferred the mixed company and declined to join him and his brother-in-law, thereby undercutting his new effort to create *hygge* by splitting the group into two smaller sections. Most guests remained seated around the long table, but interaction was largely fragmented among sections of the formal cluster. Neither the hosts nor the guests considered this to be a “successful” party.

The structure of the evening’s interaction was a product of a number of factors in addition to sheer numbers. But in independent conversations afterward with the host and several of the guests, I found general consensus that the possibility for a successful party was rendered remote in any event by virtue of its size. As one guest put it,

If they wanted to have all those people over to celebrate, they should have asked half of them one evening and half the next. Then it could have worked.

Whatever the setting of sociable gatherings—be it home, hall, park, or ferry—interaction clusters form, around a table if one is available. The characteristic proxemic density of these clusters, by which I mean the proximity of participants to one another, can be cast into relief by comparison with typical living room arrangements in the U.S.A. Americans typically use furniture to define a room’s perimeter, and once placed it is not considered movable for the temporary purposes of interaction. Consequently, participants generally

sit several feet from one another and, except at mealtimes, are not focused on a common table. Moreover, if the number of guests exceeds the number of readily available chairs, the American response tends to be a stand-up cocktail party in which guests feel little mutual commitment to the gathering as a whole.

The value placed on *hygge* clearly bears on this tendency to cluster spatially. In its aspects of coziness, of relaxed enjoyment in the warm aura of friendship or in the familiar security of kinship, the value placed on *hygge* reflects this desire for closeness, physical and emotional. The chandelier which lights the area in which the clustered group sits is commonly the sole or the strongest light in the room, visually circumscribing the cluster and defining it as a unit. Likewise, the table around which participants gather unites participants in a common focus, both proxemically and behaviorally.

Eye contact constitutes a further mechanism of inclusion. Sustained eye contact, far more typical in Danish interactions than in American, is encouraged by the proxemics of Danish interaction. In this connection Byrdal (1964:23) advises hosts that “not-so-wide tables are preferable to very wide tables—for people come in better contact when the distance between them isn’t so great.” During conversation, sustained eye contact is an indicator of full involvement both in the immediate exchange and with the individual concerned. It achieves ritual status in certain traditional behavior such as toasting where etiquette prescribes that, as the individual raises his glass in the toast, each fellow participant be acknowledged by a slight nod and direct eye contact held for several seconds, before the drink is actually consumed. As the glass is set down, this ceremonial acknowledgment is then repeated around the cluster. In fact, where only two persons are involved in a toast, eye contact may be maintained throughout, even while draining the glass.

Even among fairly intimate friends or kinsmen, however, actual body contact is usually not actively sought in the course of interaction. A cluster may require that people sit shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh, but if sufficiently few



Figure 5 —although less can be seen of the larger environment in this photo, the table proxemics emerge in greater relief. Note the tight clustering of the six adults on either side of the low, narrow table. (The photographer was seated between the two women on right.) Note also the inclusion of the child, the bottles of beer, and the raised glasses—typical signs of festivity. Low lamp is absent here because the couch on the left becomes a bed at night.



participants are present, they are likely to space themselves more liberally. This facilitates visual orientation and indicates its primacy over tactility. At the same time tactile contact is not necessarily eschewed. Two ceremonial forms are particularly common. In the one, participants link arms around the cluster while singing traditional drinking songs more or less in unison, swaying left and right in time with the music. In the other, again a two-person toast, two individuals link arms with their elbows resting on the table as they raise their glasses and drink from this position. Both cases represent expressions of mutual involvement and solidarity. More casually, individuals (usually men) will occasionally put their arm around another person's shoulders (usually a woman) and hug them slightly in a gesture of affection. These tactile displays are predominantly side to side; when face-to-face, they generally involve only arm or hand contact. While some women hug others of both sexes front to front upon parting, this appears to be relatively uncommon and, in any event, limited to the very closest of friends and relatives apart from the nuclear family. Hand-shaking, on the other hand, is universal, with no differentiation according to sex or closeness of relationship. This last ritual of greeting and parting formally signals entry into and exit from immediate mutual involvement.

Clustering in sociable interaction involves more than a particular pattern of using physical space, whether "object-space" or interpersonal. *Hygge* is part of a larger orientation to the interaction as a whole entailing a variety of behavioral strategies. Briefly, it reflects the tendency to interact with primary regard for the uniting aspects of the situation, to cluster around a common focus, spatially, socially, and psychologically.

Hospitality, both as hostmanship and as guestmanship, centers around the two basic orientations of *hygge* and *festlighed*, i.e., the tendency to define occasions as festive. Thus the host will strive to provide maximum physical comfort for his/her guests in a setting which encourages relaxation and mutual involvement. The festive definition serves as a means of intensifying participants' enjoyment by manifestly distinguishing the occasion from more routine

activities and encouraging an extra measure of indulgence on the part of both host and guests. Both *hygge* and *festlighed* are nurtured by the relaxed thoughtfulness of host and guest. As a host seeks to provide for the comfort of his guests, so it is the responsibility of guests to come ready to enjoy, to have set aside external concerns for the duration of the interaction.

When refreshments are served, the host will expressly invite guests to partake of food and will subsequently offer a welcoming toast if there is an alcoholic drink. These ritual expressions which signal the sharing of food and drink emphasize the unity of the guests by pointing up their gathering around a common board. Platters of food are likewise passed from person to person around the table rather than servings dished up from a single location being passed to individuals. Where several courses or rounds of food are involved, each person is expected to share in each round in affirmation of the cluster's unity. For example, at a New Year's Eve party I attended, several rounds of small open-face shellfish sandwiches were followed by a round of little cheese sandwiches. In this last set was included one piece with crab rather than cheese—so that the one participant who didn't like cheese might also share in the round.

Conversation, too, contributes to the atmosphere of inclusive mutuality, via implicitly acknowledged strategies of verbal interaction. A strong cultural value on egalitarianism, for example, is clearly expressed in such contexts, both in habitual patterns of modest presentation of self and in teasing sanctions directed at participants who appear to be taking themselves too seriously. This helps to prevent the potentially divisive effects of hierarchical structuring. Competitiveness is likewise discouraged. In both cases, negative sanctions typically take the form of humor, i.e., teasing and jokemaking directed at the offender.

Sociable gatherings constitute for members of a network both a major source of pleasure and an important means of affirming these social relationships. Because the success of such an occasion for a participant lies in the mutual enjoyment generated by the interaction, the focus is on



sustaining a maximal level of pleasure in an atmosphere of warm relatedness. Thus conversation tends to be general and inclusive, and participants visibly cooperate to shore up a weakening conversation or heighten the pleasure of a good one. Transient side conversations occur, but if the group seems to be moving too far from a common focus, the host or another participant is likely to introduce a new topic or toast, reinvolving all members of the cluster as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

The proxemics of interaction in a sociable gathering thus has multiple aspects, linking what might be termed physical, social, psychological, and cultural space. The physical space in which interaction takes place is initially defined by the environment of objects, particularly but not exclusively the furniture which locates participants in a circle around the table. Accentuating the closure of the grouping in a home setting is the low-hanging lamp which casts an embracing circle of light. However, this object space is not merely a background feature, constraining or facilitating behavior. Along with interpretive and behavioral strategies, it represents acts of choice on the part of human actors and a bundle of symbolic messages which affirm or modulate interactive expectations themselves. In this brief essay, I have been able only to outline the communicative load.

What is critical for the present argument, however, is (1) the integral relationship of what we commonly term "settings" with the symbolic strategies utilized "within" them; (2) the complex interplay among communicative modalities; and (3) the implications of analytic dissection. The concept of *hygge* nicely illustrates the problem. As a concept it is objectified primarily by native observers who are sufficiently detached from their cultural milieu that they choose to write about "what everybody knows." Yet even extended exegesis of its semantic implications, while interesting, does not account for its cultural significance. Only by treating it *in vivo*, as it were, examining its role as a nexus among multiple communicative modalities and as a pivot for diverse behavioral strategies—only in this way are we able to illuminate adequately the lived reality it is presumably our goal to explain.

Upon such a foundation, more detailed analysis of communicative process, proxemic or otherwise, may fruitfully be constructed. The absence of "natural" context, as both Watson (1972, 1974) and Hall (1974) recognize, is the "nagging, seemingly insoluble difficulty involved in cross-cultural proxemic research in a laboratory setting" (Watson 1972:449). Yet both have chosen to sidestep the problem in favor of rigorous control on observation. The danger in this choice is that, while variables may be more readily controlled under such circumstances, the underlying goal—that of understanding human communication in daily social process—may be controlled into inaccessibility. Similarly, exclusive focus on any single communicative channel or mode risks simultaneous obfuscation of the dense (often tangled) load of messages actually in circulation among participants.

Clearly, the simplification generic to analysis serves important purposes, not least in aiding us as observers to disentangle the complexity with which social life confronts

us. My concern here is simply that the analysis remain grounded in the experience of participants. Hymes (1972:19) speaks to this point when he cautions that:

An observer may be able to obtain a wealth of information [for example] about the inhabitants from their house. What portion of its manifest features is information *from* them, in the sense of expressing choices they have themselves made or accepted, is problematic without inquiry, as is the portion so treated by receivers of the messages, present in the house in capacities normal to the culture.

Having established the interconnectedness of modalities within normal cultural contexts, it becomes possible to proceed with more specialized strands of analysis such as the structure and interrelationship of particular codes, the development of interpretive and behavioral competence, the strategies of code manipulation, and so forth.

The place of visual modes of communication in Danish life, for example, may be examined more intensively by research on such topics as the codes used in production of "home" and professional photographic/video media, personal dress, preparation and presentation of food, or furniture-making and other utilitarian arts. "Danish furniture" is renowned: non-Danish consumers often have a rather stereotypic image of its characteristics, and numerous books have been written about it as an art/craft form. The codes which inform its design, however, cannot be understood without reference to the complex cultural values salient to the designers, as well as to strategies invoked by them to realize, manipulate, and modify these values. Such a study would also expose the relationship between the codes used by designers and those used by the range of Danish consumers in evaluating and utilizing the articles produced.

That elucidation of visual or other modes of communication depends on thoroughly situated analysis is perhaps patent. Certainly this proposition receives extensive programmatic assent. What remains is to proceed with research oriented by it. It has been my purpose here to exemplify, if sketchily, one direction that properly contextualized research ought to go.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Many reasons for its neglect thus far can be adduced. Among the most central, however, are these. First, proxemic behavior is situated, context-specific behavior and as Hall (1974) has underscored, we have not developed adequate tools for analyzing contexts of human action. Second, most students of sociocultural process have accepted as unproblematic our cultural dichotomies between "subject" and "object," "person" and "thing," "action" and "setting." Third, nearly all proxemic research thus far has been informed by a model of communication which obscures the generative dynamic of contextually situated behavior. (By this I mean the fact that social interaction generates, sustains, modifies that which we perceive as "pattern" in behavior or "social organization"—and that this is *the* dynamic of social life.) As a result we have failed to develop an analytic framework which adequately acknowledges the human activity implicit in the very existence and definition of "physical" features of settings and, at the same time, conceptually integrates such features (e.g., the structure of visual space) with behavioral process. Space is significant in communication precisely because its usage *is* communicative in and of itself and because it influences communication via multiple channels in its role as "setting." These issues have been dealt with more fully in Friedman Hansen (n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> The field research on which this report is based, conducted from August 1968–August 1969 and May–June 1972, was supported in part by USPH Training Grant GM-1224 and a Summer Faculty Fellowship



provided by Indiana University. All statistics are as of 1969 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> *At huske* is most commonly used for everyday acts of remembering or for remembering concrete things. For example, "Remember to write!" "He has lived here as far back as I can remember." *At erindre* frequently has an aspect of reminiscence. *Erindring* denotes recollection, especially of personal biographical experiences. One would be likely to *huske* yesterday, but to *erindre* one's fifth birthday. Examples of usage for *at mindes* are: "He reminds me of his father" (i.e., he suggests his father); "I'm reminded of that time we were together." Noting the distortion which tends to mar memories of one's childhood, Gjedde (1962:32) comments:

But about the fragments [of memory] that I am speaking of here, this holds true: one can never say 'I *husker* clearly'; one can only say 'I *mindes* vaguely.' But what vigor there is in this obscurity!

<sup>4</sup> Danes, and no doubt other Scandinavians, are acutely aware of the hours of light throughout the year. Frequently described as "sun worshippers," they do in fact hunger for the sun during the many dark months of fall and winter. The newspapers and some calendars indicate the daily hours of sunrise and sunset, and these tend to be mentioned in casual conversation. The longest day of the year, the twenty-fourth of June, is blessed with 17½ hours of sunlight. By September twenty-third, there are an equal number of hours of light and darkness, and the light hours steadily diminish in favor of darkness to the seven hours mentioned above. The twenty-second of December is truly a day for rejoicing, since from this day the light hours once again begin slowly to gain in number.

<sup>5</sup> *Uhyggelig* is literally *un-hygge*. But it can mean this to the extreme: uncanny, creepy, sinister, or gruesome are among the word's range of meanings. Both meanings are implied in this quotation. *Uhygge* is the substantival form of this word.

<sup>6</sup> The Danish word *rum*, here translated as space, means also room. In the latter meaning, which is probably the more correct translation, the word implies emptiness and impersonality. A room *per se* could be termed a *rum*; but a room that serves a function would generally be referred to by a more specific name. The two main types of *rum* in Danish living space, *stuer og værelser*, represent respectively rooms in which one spends the bulk of one's waking hours—the living room and dining room—and rooms in which one performs more peripheral functions, particularly sleeping rooms. A hotel room, as in this example, would be known as a *værelse*, inasmuch as its primary function is for sleeping. In its transformation, however, it approaches being a *stue*—"a *hyggelig* place to spend time." According to Aage Salling (1964:58), a *værelse* is a room in which someone "dwells." Thus neither the bathroom (*badeværelse*) nor the kitchen (*køkken*) is a *værelse*.

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